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à la mémoire d'André Lascombes

***To entertain, instruct  
and celebrate***  
*Studies in early modern theatre and  
theatricality in memory of André  
Lascombes*

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# The Staging of *Everyman*

then and now\*

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Dramatic records so far uncovered do not document any productions of *Everyman*. Answers to questions like “What kind of audience would it have been performed before?” and “What type of stage was it performed on?” can only be of a hypothetical nature. Furthermore, questions like whether visual artists were influenced by plays of the period, or whether religious plays like *Everyman*, which had their roots in cultural experience, were inspired by the manner in which the visual arts represented religious scenes, are also difficult to answer. Iconographic study can provide convincing information capable of illuminating how a play like *Everyman* may have been dramatised. Like paintings and sculpture, the medieval drama had as its intent the presentation of scenes before the eyes of beholders, and it seems highly likely that *Everyman* shared this orientation. A great many pointers in the printed texts suggest that indeed it was intended as a piece to be enacted.

The present paper stems from my involvement in the staged reading of the play in Middle English which formed part of the colloquium held in Tours in October 2008. This has led to deeper reflections on the way in which the verbal aspects of the texts, and the visual elements these imply, convey the religious preoccupations of a fifteenth-century audience drawn together on a communal occasion to be entertained—and perturbed—by the dramatic depiction of its own behaviour. The literal level of the language and action exists as a vehicle for a didactic lesson that directly reflects the order of Christian life of the period. In spite of its apparent simplicity and naivety of mode, *Everyman*, as translated and adapted from the Dutch *Elckerlijck*, is an intellectu-

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ally sophisticated play produced by someone whose theological and rhetorical training taps into the contemporary religious art that was accessible even to the common people in ways that set up powerful resonances. I propose to explore such resonances here by examining a selection of instances in which iconographical material is manipulated in the service of the play's didacticism, producing meaning beyond the surface level. Such instances pose a particular challenge to a modern production of the play, which cannot rely on an audience's familiarity with the cultural factors that shaped medieval sensibilities.

The first instance occurs in the Messenger's opening speech, when, in line 4, he gives the play the precise title of *The Summoning of Everyman* and states (ll. 5-6) that it will concern the transitoriness of life and the need for man to "take good heed to the ending" (l. 11).<sup>1</sup> *Everyman* was written within a cultural milieu preoccupied with death, and the visual arts abound with allegorical figures of death in a variety of forms but especially in representations of the Dance of Death and related subjects, for example, the legend of The Three Living and the Three Dead. The latter, which originally appeared, it would seem, in an anonymous thirteenth-century French poem, concerns three young men suddenly confronted by three dead, who rise from their graves to warn them of their mortal state and the necessity to live without sin. Like the Dance, whose origins are more obscure, the Legend was widely diffused in the visual arts, as well as in literary variations, from the fourteenth to the early sixteenth centuries. Furthermore, the figure of Death as Sergeant summoning mortals to the end of their terrestrial existence is a recurrent one in the period. He probably made his first appearance in the *Danse Macabre* at Les Innocents in Paris and in its English version, the *Dance of Paul's* in London, for which John Lydgate translated the French verses accompanying the painted scenes. In Lydgate's version we find the following lines spoken by an officer accustomed to arresting others in the line of duty:

Howe darst thou deth set on me arrest  
 Which am the kyngis chosen officer  
 And yistirday walkyng est & west  
 Myn office did with ful dispitous cheere  
 But now this day I am arrest[ed] heere  
 And may nat flee thowh I hadde it sworn  
 Eche man is loth to deie ferr or neer  
 That hath nat lernyd [for] to deie afforne. (LYDGATE, 1931: ll. 409-416)

The lesson to be learnt is the same as that promulgated by every evocation of the *Dance of Death*. Death is an impartial leveller who spares no condition or estate; the moment of

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1 *Everyman* is cited from CAWLEY, ed., 1974.

his arrest is sudden, arbitrary and unexpected; as in *Everyman*, the shock of his summons will be distressful to those who have not spent their lives preparing for their ending. The shaping influence of these motifs on the play is obvious, and it is noteworthy that the English adapter removes the explicit reference to the *Dance* that he found in the Dutch,<sup>2</sup> as if to engage the audience's imagination more actively.

The actual depiction of Death in *Everyman* appears to me to develop this technique, not only through a conflation of the various iconographical and literary representations, but also through a highly theatrical ploy: the use of disguise. Sarah Carpenter has called attention to the unusual response of *Everyman* to his initial encounter with death (CARPENTER, 2008: 10-11). In contrast to the horrified recognition of Death by *Humanum Genus* in *The Castle of Perseverance*, *Everyman* does not immediately recognise his interlocutor, as would seem very strange if Death is blatantly costumed as a skeleton or rotting corpse. Indeed, *Everyman* seems to be making what he thinks is a clever joke when Death stops him to ask where he is "going / Thus gaily" (ll. 85-86). "Why askest thou? / Wouldest thou wit?" (ll. 87-88), he replies. Death in *Elckerlijck* speaks of telling *Everyman*, of explaining what God wants, but in the English version Death speaks twice (ll. 89, 98) of *showing* his meaning. This suggests a preparation for a dramatic revelation, supported by dramatic irony thanks to the audience's prior knowledge, at line 115, when Death discloses his identity in answer to *Everyman*'s declaration: "I know thee not. What messenger art thou?" (l. 114). Could it not be that Death employs the hooded shroud frequently portrayed in iconography to conceal his face and body until this moment? Such a device appears to lurk behind the figure of the mysterious Old Man who has seemed to some commentators a stand-in for Death in Chaucer's *The Pardoner's Tale*, when the three young revellers accost him, asking, "Why artow al forewrapped save thy face?"<sup>3</sup> and the tradition of hooded disguise is embedded in the venerable proverb, "*Cucullus non facit monachum*" — a proverb brought vividly to dramatic life in *Measure for Measure* when Lucio receives a rude shock upon doffing the hood of the Duke disguised as a friar.<sup>4</sup>

It was with such a possible effect of disclosure in mind that, in the Tours production, we presented a figure of Death far removed from the traditional image (top-hat and tails). Death also carried a trombone on which he sounded a blast to stop *Everyman* in his tracks. This was a modern gesture towards reproducing the manner in which the play insistently assimilates Death's summoning of *Everyman* to the universal summons

2 *Elckerlijck*, ed. DAVIDSON, WALSH and BROOS, 2007: ll. 106-113.

3 Chaucer, ed. BENSON, 1987: l. 718.

4 See William SHAKESPEARE, *Measure for Measure*, EVANS and TOBIN, gen. eds, 1997: V.i.262 and 351-357.

by angelic trumpets to the Final Judgement. The point is implicitly made by Everyman himself in line 843, after his desertion by Beauty, Strength, and Discretion, when he refers to death, not as striking with a dart, but as “blow[ing] his blast”.

Everyman’s smart-alec greeting of Death, which is not in the Dutch, calls attention to a motif that a medieval audience might well have registered. Everyman, according to Death, is “walking [...] gaily”, presumably in pursuit of pleasures. So Lydgate has the officer “walkyng est & west” when he is arrested. The effect of the arrest in both cases is to lend sudden direction to the errant motion of the victim, to set him willy-nilly on a journey or pilgrimage. As has been observed with regard to the drama of the Middle Ages, and as suits the east-west orientation of medieval cathedrals, the journey that is life itself properly proceeds from west to east, towards the rising sun that symbolises the risen Christ.<sup>5</sup> One wonders whether medieval playing areas were laid out so as to accommodate such directional symbolism. The theological meaning would not have been lost on the audience.

Neither would the public have collapsed the actors into their roles as modern audiences tend to do. The medieval actor was not a medium of his own personality and feelings but a transmitter of theological matter. Actors trained in modern schools learn how to perform their parts according to the motivation and emotion that lie behind the words expressed by a given character. Characters in the medieval theatre will comment upon what they do at the same time as they do it and pass on information to the audience when they want to make sure that the spectators see and understand what is being done for their edification. This distinction between modern and medieval carries particular significance for the parts of God and Everyman. In the case of the former, the gap between human vehicle and divine being would originally have been built into the theatrical experience—all the more so if, as must often have happened, spectators recognised the actor playing God, with or without a gilded mask, as a member of their community. The challenge faced by a modern production lies in maintaining this effect of distancing and depersonalisation, and this we attempted at Tours by having a male and female actor flip a coin to decide who would play God (the other taking the role of Death), then by having the toss won by the woman. As for Everyman, where the need was to foreground the allegorical inclusiveness of the figure, as opposed to preventing identification of one actor with the divinity, it was decided to split the part among several actors. This had, we hoped, the positive effect of showing the multiple identities of Everyman, who is the vessel, the container of us all, into which we as spectators must project ourselves.

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5 See TAYLOR, 1982: 36.

Inevitably, there is a broad category of iconographically charged allusions built into the text, and which no doubt would have been picked up by a medieval audience, but which are lost on present-day spectators and difficult to convey by stage devices. I am thinking, for instance, of the subtle deployment of femininity in connection with the allegorical representations of Beauty and Strength. Beauty is obviously a female character (though played by a man), as is conventional enough in itself. But when Beauty deserts Everyman, she resorts to a colloquialism that is not merely neutral: “I take my tap in my lap, and am gone” (l. 801). The primary reference is to the female practice of carrying one’s spinning to a neighbour’s house and taking it home again after the visit. But there are deeper ideological connotations relating to the fallen state of women and, more broadly, of mankind. When Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden, they had to work in order to survive, for the earth no longer provided food spontaneously. Adam delved and Eve span after the Fall, the latter activity being associated with the awareness of nakedness and the need to clothe oneself against the cold. In the context of her desertion of Everyman, Beauty’s virtual lapse into the role of a spinner signals her affinity with Eve, hence her tendency to deceive, her association with pride—in short, the “true” fallen side of Everyman’s human nature emblematised by female frailty.

When Strength deserts Everyman, there is a seeming anomaly in the text, where this male character, who had previously boasted of accompanying Judas Maccabaeus, one of the Nine Worthies, suddenly attracts from Everyman a female pronoun and a scathing predicate: “He that trusteth in his Strength, / She him deceiveth at the length” (ll. 827-828). On the surface of it, it would seem that the translator/adaptor has made a simple mistake, misled by the feminine gender of the Dutch word *cracht*, meaning Strength (compare German *Kraft*).<sup>6</sup> At the same time the translator has added to his original the notion of deceit, and this may point to a deliberate desire to create an additional effect. Strength and fortitude in medieval imagery, such as carvings in choir stalls, are often personified by Samson, himself an Old Testament type of Christ, given the latter’s overcoming of death and the forces of evil. Samson, by contrast, forfeited his strength as a result of the deceitful practices of Delilah, and this allegedly feminine propensity to deceive emerges through the slippage of Everyman’s discourse from one gender to the other.

The moral lesson that Everyman learns is that he cannot any longer trust in his physical attributes, such as his strength. He has to put off trust in himself and recognise that he must be like Christ, making the transition from type to anti-type, from Old Testament fallen hero to the New Adam of the New Testament. This shows how Everyman has still been confusing the death of the body with the death of the soul at this late stage of the

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6 See *Elckerlijc*, ed. DAVIDSON, WALSH and BROOS, 2007: l. 782.

play. Only when he becomes a Christic figure by asking mercy in the words spoken on the cross does he acknowledge the source of true eternal strength: “*In manus tuas, of might most / For ever, commendo spiritum meum*” (ll. 886-887). Knowledge clinches the assimilation of Everyman to Christ when she pronounces the news of the victory achieved through his descent into the grave:

Now hath he suffered that we all shall endure;  
 [...]
 Methinketh that I hear angels sing,  
 And make great joy and melody  
 Where Everyman’s soul received shall be. (ll. 888-893)

Incidentally, the reference to angels singing, which is followed by the speech of an angel welcoming Everyman’s spotless soul, raises further issues of staging, then and now. Obviously, there is the question of finding appropriate music in a modern production to match the celestial vocal style that undoubtedly formed part of the code of such glorious endings. But the question of staging itself also has at least two challenging aspects. At Tours we chose not to stage the reception of Everyman’s soul into heaven, but rather to evoke it through music accompanying the angel voice, recited as a duet, not simply because staging the angel above would have posed difficulties, but because the portrayal of the ascending soul itself seemed problematic. Medieval images do provide some indications of how this might have been imagined and figured, if not exactly staged. A roof boss in the North Transept of Norwich cathedral shows the souls of children massacred by Herod being received into heaven. Some have their hands clasped in prayer, and angels escort them all, presumably as Horatio imagines that “flights of angels” will “sing” Hamlet “to [his] rest”<sup>7</sup>. The figures are naked and have no genitals—points which would also make sense in a staging, however it was managed, of Everyman’s ascent to heaven. Everyman has put off the garment of flesh which clothed and imprisoned the soul. The absence of genitals specifically suggests freedom from sexual desire. It is notable that the final attribute to desert Everyman is Five Wits, to be understood as the Five Senses, which enable him to experience sensuality, including sexuality. By contrast, in imagery depicting the punishments of hell, genitals are often prominently featured as a site of retribution for sins of the flesh.

Such sins are not particularly prominent in *Everyman*, of course—in contrast to the avarice embodied by Goods—but a close reading of the text helps us to see that they would not be absent for an audience attuned to theological and iconographical nuance. Lechery

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7 SHAKESPEARE, *Hamlet*, EVANS and TOBIN, gen. eds, 1997: V.ii.360.



is mockingly evoked by Kyndred's ironic offer of a female companion, a virtual party-girl, to accompany Everyman on his journey to death. It is also present in Fellowship's willingness to share with Everyman the lustful company of women (l. 273). In fact, Fellowship adds to lechery at this point an encoding of the sin of gluttony ("eat, and drink, and make good cheer" [l. 273]). He might well have had appropriate accoutrements: a bottle, a leg of mutton. He might also have worn, and gestured to, a dagger at the point where he evokes the sin of wrath in offering to commit murder for Everyman's sake: "But and thou will murder, or any man kill, / In that I will help thee with a good will" (ll. 281-282). Fellowship also encodes the sin of pride when he expresses the attraction of the possible gift of a new gown (l. 292), and this might suggest a costume of the kind conventionally associated with vanity and worldliness.<sup>8</sup> Ann Nichols documents the common wearing of so-called "dagged" costumes—that is, clothes with jagged edges—by "personifications of the deadly sins, in particular by Pride [...] and Luxuria, but also by Ire" (NICHOLS, 1986-87: 310), so this would suit Fellowship for more than one reason. She concludes that "dagging is part of the established iconography of personified sin and is so used by the dramatic writers" (NICHOLS, 1986-87: 311). It is tempting to see the sin of Sloth as glanced at in Cousin's excuse for not accompanying Everyman: "I have the cramp in my toe" (l. 356). Given the unequivocal association of Goods with covetousness, this would leave absent from the picture only the sin of Envy, which indeed it is difficult to locate in any of the false friends of Everyman. On the other hand, this might just be part of the point and a significant absence. For what they all have in common, of course, is a dramatic display of no envy at all when they come to learn of Everyman's unenticing summons and destination. The audience leaves the playing area with the words of Kindred ringing in its ears—"It availeth not us to tice" (l. 359)—and with the *knowledge* that each of them must journey alone along the penitent's road to salvation.

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8 Gallants at the time were known for wearing short coats with jagged edges for the sake of fashion. In *Mankind*, the eponymous protagonist's long coat is shortened to symbolise his depraved state, his pact with the Vice characters, as well as his gullibility.

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